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ABSTRACT

Personnel management constitutes a substantial proportion of the elementary school principal's responsibilities. Constructive ways in which principals can identify and effectively confront deterioration of staff job performance are discussed in this newsletter. Effective interpersonal confrontation involves preparation, active listening, objectivity, positive criticism, directness, and consistency. Nine "dos" and "don'ts" for constructive confrontation are offered. (LMI)

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VOLUME 8, NUMBER 6 JUNE 1990

HERE'S HOW

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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HERE'S HOW

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Constructive Confrontation

EMU Labor Studies

As the manager of your school, you spend a great deal of time on personnel matters. Some principals say this single responsibility can absorb over half the hours in a full school day.

But when you analyze a random sampling of your encounters with teachers and classified employees, you will no doubt discover that certain people on your staff appear only now and then in the sample—but others occupy the lion's share of your time. They are individuals with a pattern of *continuing and repeated* problems of performance on the job.

What are some of the patterns of behavior that indicate chronic deterioration of job performance? Here are several of the most common:

Absenteeism. Everybody has an occasional but sudden emergency that forces one to miss a day or two of work at school. However, among your staff (as among your student body), chronic absenteeism is not occasional. It is a pattern of repeated, recurring, and excessive tardiness and absenteeism: lateness in the morning, early and unexplained departures in the afternoon, the shaving of minutes and even hours from every assignment, and an unusually high rate of mild illnesses (colds, flu, stomach distress) expressed through excessive sick leave.

Confusion and Difficulty in Concentration. These may be symptoms of something clinically serious, such as the onset of a mental or emotional illness that the individual wishes to deny or simply cannot detect.

Job performance is consistently marred by forgotten instructions, missed details, frustrations with complicated tasks or decision making, misunderstandings, and the expenditure of more and more time to accomplish less and less work.

Sometimes an individual may exhibit these symptoms in the form of chronic accidents in and around the school, such as tripping on stairs, dropping armloads of supplies, and spilling water, food, or paint. If an employee has these accidents *only* in your school, you would have cause to suspect the making of mischief. But that's rare. It is far more likely that such an individual is also having minor but frequent accidents in and around the home, as well as on the road to and from school.

Helping an individual confront these unpleasant and even frightening facts may save that person's life, as well as restore peace to your school.

Poor Collegial Relations. Some individuals consistently bungle relationships with their colleagues on the staff. And while you're working hard to build a spirit of cooperation and teamwork, one or two people may be canceling out all your good work by their own negative and distruptive behavior among their peers.

Their negative behavior may not be that obvious either—no loud arguments, no acting out of aggression. Rather, they may, for example, continually borrow money, an annoying habit even when it is promptly repaid. Or they may overreact to real or imagined criticism, harbor unreasonable resentments, or avoid some associates while clinging for dear life to others. They are not only out of step with the rest of the school staff, but may be responsible for other people's low morale and poor job performance, too.

Rigidity. In an elementary or middle school, where change of some kind seems to occur minute by minute, some staff personnel maintain a firm and tenacious rigidity, impervious to any change whatsoever. There are many reasons why people reject or fear change on the job. And in some schools, where the leadership is unpredictable, the staff may have good reason to fear change.

This article is adapted from information made available through the Labor Studies Program, Department of Economics, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197.

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But when a staff person, in an otherwise reasonable school atmosphere, is unreasonably unbending, it may be a signal of something chronic and disturbing that needs to be confronted before the individual's performance on the job is unacceptable and irreparable.

Absenteeism, confusion, poor collegial relations, and rigidity are just a few of the most common patterns of negative behavior. However, a full list would be very long indeed. But whatever the behavior may be, the key important danger signs are these: The behavior is repeated over and over again, it is out of the ordinary, and it reduces job performance to unacceptable levels.

As the manager on the scene, your first task is to document the pattern of behavior and the job deterioration it seems to be causing. Therefore, you need to make a confidential record of each incident that you witness or that is reported to you.

With the help of such a record, there's always the chance you may realize that the situation is really not as bad as you thought—or it's not as simple as you thought.

Confrontation May Be All That's Left

For some troubled—or troublesome—individuals, your best efforts to help have been turned aside. Their job performance continues to deteriorate, the job performance of others on the staff suffers as well, and your own patience and compassion begin to deteriorate as well.

What to do? If you've tried other approaches—an informal chat over coffee after school, the help of sympathetic colleagues on staff—and these haven't worked, you may be left with only one option: that is, to sit down with the individual and try—together—to face the issues as you see them. In other words, a session of constructive confrontation.

Personnel problems never improve spontaneously. Someone has to take the initiative and bring all the issues and the tension out into the open. And that someone ought to be you.

While it's not a pleasant event to forecast, a confrontation session can nevertheless be constructive for both parties. If nothing else, such a session releases the pressures that may have been building up as a result of frustration, anger, guilt . . . and silence.

Get Some Distance

Your key to a constructive confrontation session is to *be prepared*. Get yourself ready, have a good idea of what to expect, have a sense of what your own reactions may be, and set the stage accordingly.

How do you get ready for such a difficult event?

First, you need to make a candid assessment of your own feelings toward the staff person. Good or bad—that's what they are. And you need to understand that your own feelings of apprehension—even misgivings—about the coming confrontation are perfectly natural and legitimate. You *are* worried. You *are* uncomfortable. Because you *are human*.

Second, if it will help, talk out your feelings with a friend or a counselor. Do whatever else is necessary to achieve honesty with *yourself*. For example, be sure you are confronting what is—*to you*—an unacceptable level of irresponsibility and low job performance. Be sure in your own mind that you would take this action *regardless* of the individual involved, that you do not have different tolerance levels for different staff persons. Your position of greatest strength in these situations rests on the fact that your job performance standards are fair and are uniformly applied.

Third, you need to accept this task as necessary. It's something you just have to do, if you truly want to see an individual improve and regain his or her position as a valuable member of your team.

Remember, the goal of a constructive confrontation is *not punishment*; it is *motivation*. Hopefully, the result of the confrontation will be a strong motivation on the part of the staff person in question to get his or her life in order and then to regain the status of a trusted and valued employee.

Anticipate Trouble Spots

Once you have reached a "critical distance" for yourself, you should take the next step and look at the situation from the staff person's point of view. You can thus anticipate—at least, to some extent—how that person might respond to what you have to say. With that insight, you can go on and plan your own reactions as well.

If the individual in question has, in fact, brought you to this juncture, where you must trot out some ugly truths, then you should be prepared for that person to become extremely defensive. This may stem not only from the simple instinct to defend one's self when attacked, but it also may arise from the individual's sudden anxiety about his or her own loss of control over events—and from the possible loss of employment itself.

Defensive reactions may take several forms:

Are You Listening?

Listening skills are particularly important in trying to identify the problem causes during a meeting with a problem performer . . . A technique called *active listening* can be quite helpful . . . When your employee makes a partially disclosing statement, you simply rephrase what the speaker has said. This allows you to test whether or not the employee's comments were heard accurately and makes it clear to the employee that he or she was actually listened to. Phrases such as "It sounds like you are saying . . ." or "As I understand it, what you're saying is . . ." can be used to test understandings. This may be coupled with an attempt to reflect the underlying feelings behind what the employee says. Phrases useful here include "I suppose that made you feel good . . ." or "I guess that hurt a lot."

From *Getting Things Done Without Getting Done In*, by Dennis J. Moberg and David F. Caldwell; published by Scott, Foresman and Company, Glenview, IL (1989).

• The offering of elaborate and not quite believable excuses

• Attempts to shift the blame to others or to play you off against others on the staff ("So-and-so is never here on time, but you don't say word one!")

• Efforts to gain your sympathy or a new intimacy through flattery, sharing of secrets, and so on

• Simple fabrications.

You need to be ready for such responses as these and to carefully put them aside, in order for the staff person to hear your message and focus on it: "Your job performance is deteriorating and you could face serious consequences, unless we turn the situation around. So please forget this other stuff for a while and let's focus on the problem at hand."

But this is a dangerous crossroads as well. At this point it is very tempting for a manager or supervisor to take on the role of seer-counselor-confessor-parent. Don't be tempted.

Unless you are well trained and experienced in behavioral diagnostics—don't diagnose the problem. You may suspect a personal or family problem, a substance abuse problem, or any one of a hundred other possibilities, but keep those suspicions to yourself. The chances are very good that your suspicions are simplistic—and wrong.

Further, you must bear in mind the point of the session, which is to confront the staff person with the painful truth about his or her deteriorating job performance in order for that person to be motivated and take the initiative for change and improvement.

Time and Place

Finally, you need to set the stage, so to speak. Here are a few tips to keep in mind:

• Make an appointment to meet with the individual to "talk together about a matter of mutual importance and concern." Phrase the invitation—in writing—so that it sounds constructive and positive, rather than threatening.

• Make the appointment for a meeting as soon as possible; don't leave time for either of you to stew about it.

• Make sure the meeting will be completely private and uninterrupted: no phone calls, visitors, mail deliveries, or other break-ins.

• And make enough time. Set aside the amount of time you think you'll need—and add another 30 minutes to that. Getting matters settled is not a "waste of time."

Carrying out a session for constructive confrontation may not be easy. In fact, it might be downright unpleasant. But it may be the one option that's left, when you've run out of all the others. As the school's chief administrative office, you realize you have no choice but to go forward with this session. □

9 Dos and 9 Don'ts of Constructive Confrontation

DO establish the levels of job performance you expect and determine what is acceptable and unacceptable to you.

DO be consistent in your application of these standards to everyone on your staff.

DO document all incidents of poor job performance (absenteeism, tardiness, mistakes, etc.), before deciding on a session of constructive confrontation with any staff person.

DO take the responsibility to act. If you don't, matters will most likely get worse—maybe irretrievably worse.

DO anticipate—and be prepared to cope with—the staff person's defensiveness and even hostility.

DO be firm and direct. Gain the employee's respect as someone he or she can realistically trust.

DO get the employee to acknowledge that a problem exists and that only he or she can correct it.

DO get a commitment from the staff person to improve. Be equally committed to monitor that improvement.

If there is no improvement, DO take the next step—according to your district's guidelines on personnel practices—to correct the situation.

DON'T try to "cover up" for a problem staff person. Such "kindness" only postpones the inevitable: a day to face the facts.

DON'T engage in diagnostics and don't reach for convenient labels. Accept the real possibility that you just don't know what is causing the poor job performance by your staff person.

DON'T voice your suspicions of alcoholism or drug abuse or sexual misconduct, unless you know these have occurred in your school (in which case you may be bound—by other district rules—to report such information to higher authorities).

DON'T ask, "Why are you acting like this?" The answer will be an excuse of some kind. But in constructive confrontation, there are *no* excuses; personnel must come to see that they alone are responsible for their own job performance.

DON'T moralize. "You should," "you shouldn't," and "don't you know better?" will only create hostility, and that's the most effective barrier to honest communication.

DON'T make value judgments, such as "I think you're wrong" or "you're being very foolish." Instead, present the documented facts and say, "I can't accept such behavior. It has to change."

DON'T get boxed into a corner or be put on the defensive. If you have all the facts straight, it is not you but your staff person who must change.

DON'T allow yourself to be played off against the Central Office or the union or any other power center. Neither unions nor other levels of management will defend chronically poor job performance.

DON'T make idle disciplinary threats. Give a warning only of those actions you know you can and will take. □